



FIRST POLO GAME IN AMERICA

EARLY DAYS OF THE SPORT

Esther Taylor

Polo was introduced into the United States in 1876 by James Gordon Bennett, owner of *The New York Herald*. At that time no one could have foreseen that only ten years later an American polo team would meet the British in the first International Match for the Westchester Cup.

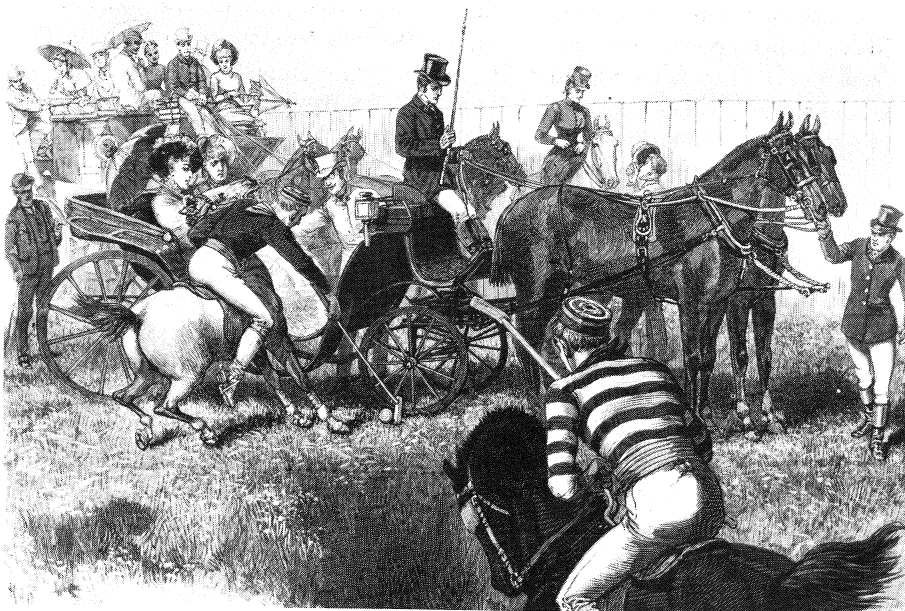
During a visit to England Mr. Bennett had seen the game played at Hurlingham and decided that he would bring it to this country. The first difficulty to overcome was that of finding ponies. However, Mr. Bennett was able to hire an English gentleman, Mr. Blassen, a good rider and an excellent judge of horses, who was given carte blanche and sent to Texas to buy stock. Leaving New York on February 19, 1876, he bought twenty-four ponies. Some were purchased south of the Rio Grande and others at San Antonio. Most of them were from the mountain districts of Mexico and were compact with good bone; they averaged about 13 hands. Mr. Blassen, with the help of a Texan and a Mexican, drove them overland to the railway and shipped them to New York, a journey lasting nearly four weeks. The ponies suffered on the way and two were injured so badly that they had to be left along the road. When they arrived in New York, they were taken to Dickels Riding Academy at 39th Street and Fifth Avenue. Then they were sold at

cost, \$75 to \$100, to a select group of Mr. Bennett's friends. These gentlemen began schooling their ponies at once and even practiced the rudiments of the game by knocking balls about in the confined space of the riding academy.

During Mr. Blassen's absence, a piece of property located a little to the north of the Jerome Park Race Track, had been purchased by Mr. Bennett for the Polo Club. Improvements began immedi-

ately. The ground was drained, the old residence and stables were overhauled, and a handsome clubhouse was built which had comfortable accommodations for members. There was even an elegant ballroom where, after the games, members could entertain their lady visitors with "a little amusement of the terpsichorean order."

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"Polo at Newport" from a sketch by H.A. Ogden printed in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, July 1883. NSL Collection



Illustration "The Game of Polo" in *Harper's Weekly*, September 1874, with accompanying caption: - "This game was recently introduced into England from the East, and is quite popular among the cavalry. At the beginning of the game the players on each side are drawn up in front of their own goal. The ball is carried to a spot midway between them, and thrown into the air. One player from each side then gallops forward rapidly; in fact, a race takes place between these two for the first hit, the others follow up, and the scuffle becomes general. Ponies are employed because they are active, strong and handy, and because they enable the riders to reach the ground easily. When both riders and horses are good, the sport is exciting, but bad falls and hard knocks sometimes make it unpleasantly dangerous." NLS Collection

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The club stables were ready in early May, and the ponies moved out from New York. They responded quickly to grooming and good care, and any lover of horse flesh would have enjoyed seeing

them in their new home.

Because polo was unknown in America, except to the few who had seen it played in England or India, it was usual for contemporary articles about the game to include background information. The article on polo in *The American Gentleman's Newspaper* for May 20, 1876, is a good example:

"The game of polo has lately been introduced into this country, and appears

already to have become very popular, as the practice games at Jerome Park have been well attended, and a general desire appears to be evinced among many of our young men to join the club. The game was first discovered in the East Indies, where it was the popular pastime of the natives of the country, among whom the Munipuris were especially proficient. An English correspondent gives a graphic description of a game he witnessed on the Maidan at Calcutta:

"There was no overlooking the workmanlike appearance of the Munipuris; both they and their ponies were ready for anything. These latter were scarcely over eleven hands high, somewhat shaggy, as strong as lions and as fleet as deer, but under extraordinary control. The saddles were broad and had the front turned over in such a way as to give the rider the strongest possible grip; the stirrup leathers were so short that the knees of the player were actually higher than the top of the saddle. . . . The trappings of the ponies were very ornate. Woolen rosettes and balls of various colors hung all around them, giving a pretty effect when the animals were in rapid motion. The men were habited in turbans tightly fastened on the head, close fitting jackets - seven dark and seven light, ornamented with gold spangles. On their legs were thick leather guards, extending a little above the knee. Fastened to their left wrists were the thongs of a whip. A short white gown completed the dress.

"The sticks they used were about four feet six inches in length, made of the

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ELEANOR LANGLEY FLETCHER

Eleanor Langley Fletcher

We report with sadness the death last December, at her Nantucket residence, of Eleanor Langley Fletcher, a major supporter of the National Sporting Library and a long time member of its Board of Directors. She was the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. William Langley of Atoka Farm, near Middleburg, Virginia. The Langleys were pillars of the Orange County Hunt, who also hunted in England and Ireland, so that Eleanor was virtually

brought up in the saddle, riding to hounds with many packs on both sides of the Atlantic and competing in Virginia and Long Island horse shows. After a 1948 hunting tour of Ireland she wrote and published *Hoofmarks on Eire*. Her nephew, James Young, is currently Joint Master of the Orange County Hunt. She is survived by a son, James L. Van Alen and two grandsons. With her second husband, Walter Fletcher, a member of the Jockey Club, she bred hunters and racehorses at their November Hall Farm, near Char-

lottesville, Va. Mrs. Fletcher's many gifts to the Library include the Edwin Cooper (c.1780-1835) painting "Groom With Hunter"; the 1838 edition of Nimrod's *Sporting*; Pierce Egan's 1825 *Sporting Anecdotes*; Radcliffe's *The Noble Science*, the 1839 and 1911 editions; seven volumes of Somerville and Ross foxhunting tales and four volumes of Surtees, to mention only a few items from her munificent donations through the years.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE TROT

Alexander Mackay-Smith

The trot is a diagonal gait: the right hind foot and the left front foot strike the ground simultaneously, followed by the left hind foot and the right front foot, also simultaneously. In executing the trot the horse's back rises and falls. The trot is also an intermediate gait: its speed is faster than the walk, slower than the canter.

Another group of gaits, also intermediate, are lateral, not diagonal. In the amble or pace the right hind foot and right front foot strike the ground simultaneously, followed by the left hind foot and left front foot, also simultaneously. In the rack, also known as the singlefoot, slow gait and broken pace, the sequence is right hind, right front, left hind, left front, at regular or nearly regular intervals. In the lateral gaits the horse's back does not rise and fall, but remains relatively level, swaying slightly from side to side.

Although the Oriental invention of stirrups reached the Occident in the 8th and 9th centuries A.D., another thousand years passed before the practice of rising in the stirrups to make the trot a more comfortable gait was generally adopted. In 1753 the British Parliament licensed post chaises for hire. Because road improvements engineered by Telford and McAdam led to greater speeds in harness, the post boys, riding post horses pulling post chaises on the post roads, started "posting" in the stirrups for self protection.

Up until the 18th century, therefore, the lateral gaits, especially before the invention of the stirrup, were considerably more comfortable for the rider than the trot. Amblers and rackers were thus preferred for travel, for processions, and for sport. For warfare, on the other hand, comfort was not a consideration. More importantly, the diagonal gait, with two feet on the ground on opposite sides of the animal, provides a base of support which is broader and more secure than that provided by the one sided amble. In the melee of hand-to-hand combat the trot provided a more solid platform for wield-

ing sword, mace and lance. In consequence military men, rulers and generals, are frequently shown riding trotters. For travel the medieval knight rode an ambler - either he or his squire led the much larger trotting and galloping destrier used in warfare and in tournaments.

In 1550, however, the trot was given higher status through the publication of *Ordini di Cavalcare* by Federico Grisone of Naples, which set forth the principles and practice of what is now known as dressage. For gentlemen of fashion this art promptly became as indispensable an accomplishment as fencing, dancing, singing and playing a musical instrument. When performed by a ruler or general on parade, an air above the ground, such as the levade, was a crowd pleaser. Smooth transitions are an essential element in dressage. The transition from amble to canter and back is difficult, but the transition from trot to canter and back is easily accomplished. Dressage outlawed the amble and glorified the trot.

The amble and rack continued to be preferred for training racehorses, however. The British race horses of the 17th century and the American quarter race horses of the 17th and 18th centuries were runners and ambler, not runners and trotters. The published racing manuals of Markham (1593-1734 in England, 1764-1842 in America) and of Baret (1618), Browne (1624) and Hope (1696), specified the amble and the rack for warming up and cooling out a racehorse, and warned against the trot as "prejudicial to speed or swiftness."

The 17th century British racehorse, known as the Hobby, had sprinter conformation. On Oct. 17, 1665, King Charles II inaugurated at Newmarket the first of a series of races for Kings Plates which required horses to carry 12 stones (168 pounds) and to win three out of four heats of four miles each.

To increase their horses' ability to carry speed over a distance of ground, as required by the new Kings Plates conditions, British breeders turned to desert Arabians - the Leedes Arabian (c.1695),

the Darley Arabian (1705), the Godolphin Arabian (1728), and others. The Bedouin sheiks used pacing camels for travel. Since their horses were used principally for tribal raids, and since comfort was thus not a factor, Arabian horses were trotters who could gallop endlessly as required by desert warfare. It was these imported 18th century sires who transformed the British racehorse from an ambler into a trotter.

The better roads which inspired posting in the mid-18th century ushered in the coaching age and travel by carriage. The first British mail coach was established between London and Bath in 1784. A vehicle pulled by a trotting horse provides a steadier, smoother ride than a vehicle pulled by a pacing horse.

Thus it follows that four factors have contributed to the increasing popularity of

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One of the first graphic representations in the Occident of saddles with stirrups, *The Four Horsemen in the Commentary of St. Beatus of Lichbar*, written about 776 AD.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE TROT

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the trot - dressage from 1550, distance racing from 1665, posting from 1753 and the coaching age from 1784.

The acceptance of the trot proceeded more gradually on the European continent - as late as 1840 in France the practice of posting was called "à l'anglaise" (in the English manner).

The lateral gaits have retained much of their popularity in the Western Hemisphere. We have the Paso Finos of Puerto Rico, Peru and Bolivia, the Mangalargas and Campolinas of Brazil. The North American laterally gaited breeds include the American Saddlebred, the Tennessee Walking Horse and the Missouri Fox Trotter. Pacing races considerably outnumber trotting races for American Standardbreds, the world's dominant breed of harness racehorses.

Nevertheless, as compared to the



Copperplate engraving by Diepenbeke of "Airs Above Ground" from William Cavendish the Duke of Newcastle's *A General System of Horsemanship In All Its Branches*, printed in 1743. The distortion in the photograph is due to the original appearing as a double page illustration in the book. A gift from Eleanor Langley Fletcher to the NSL.

other intermediate gaits, the amble, the pace, the rack and the singlefoot, the trot is by far the most widely used and seems

likely to remain so.

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lightest bamboo, with the cross piece at the end, rather more slanted than those used at Hurlingham or indeed in Calcutta. There were three ridiculously dressed men for keeping the ground, each clad in a long white gown and a cap with three points of the exact pattern worn by English clowns and only wanting the bells to be the perfection of ugliness. The ball used was about the size of a cricket ball. . . . There were no goal posts; the area, in the form of a parallelogram, was marked out by deep cut lines in the grass, over which the players did not hesitate to rush occasionally, to the discomfiture and terror of the onlookers.' "

The description of the hotly contested game between the light and the dark jackets was quoted in full and was so lively that it must certainly have aroused the interest of even the most blase reader. *The Spirit of the Times* for May 24, 1876, used a less exotic approach:

"The introduction of the game of Polo has established an interest in a new branch of out-door sport that cannot but have a beneficial effect. Horsemanship is an accomplishment that has not received a proper amount of attention in this section of the country, although in the west . . . we have as good riders as are to be found in the world, here there is a sad want of

knowledge of the art. Mr. Bennett, in bringing out Polo, has given additional excitement to horseback exercise which is being appreciated by our young men and . . . we shall soon have . . . equestrians that will show well in the pigskin in any steeplechase with gentlemen riders up."

"The game itself is virtually the familiar shinny or hockey of our boyhood played in the saddle. It is a refined edition of the old game and was recently introduced into England by some cavalry officers who had been on foreign service and learned the game from the natives of East

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India. It is played on ponies averaging from 12 to 13 hands, and instead of the old shinny stick the horseman carries a light bamboo cane about 4 feet 6 inches in length with a crosspiece about 5 inches long attached at an angle of 120 degrees at the end. The ball is made of light wood and the object of the game is to drive the ball through the opponents' goal."

"Several practice games have already been played at Jerome Park and such interest has been taken in the sport that there was no difficulty in finding riders for the handsome little Texas ponies that Mr. Bennett purchased for the members of the club. The grounds at Jerome Park are well adapted to the game and when the new clubhouse is completed we shall see . . . a group of ladies . . . seated on a large veranda watching their polo friends striving for supremacy."

An eye witness of the first game played, H.A. Buck, states the official opening game took place May 17, 1876. On the day of the historic game, Mr. Bennett invited some friends and acquaintances to meet him at the old Brunswick Hotel on Fifth Avenue at 26th Street in New York and ride out to Jerome Park on his park drag. The party included a few ladies, several members of the Polo Club and the editor of *The Spirit of the Times*, E.A. Buck accompanied by his son H.A. Buck who was at that time twelve years old.

Because the club grounds were not ready, a spot at the south end of Jerome Park had been selected for the game. The grass had been mowed and rolled; the goals, about 100 yards apart, marked by flags and the boundaries defined with stakes.

The ponies were sleek and full of animation, their manes and tails close cropped. The players were for the most part appropriately dressed in boots, breeches and shirt, and each had a silk

kerchief tied around the wrist. On their heads they wore English officers' undress caps without visors, which gave no protection from the sun and were useless against mallet blows.

Mr. Bennett and Lord Mandeville chose sides: Col. Jay, Mr. Kane, Mr. Mott and Mr. Purdy were on Mr. Bennett's team while Lord Mandeville chose: Mr. Robbins, Mr. Thorne, Mr. Jay and Mr. VanBuren. Lord Mandeville's experience enabled his team to win several games, however, later in the afternoon Mr. Bennett "succeeded in initiating some of his side into the mysteries and they scored one victory."

"The Second Day" was reported in *The American Gentleman's Newspaper*:

"Another game was played last Saturday, in which nearly the same party took part. Colonel Jay drove out his drag for the accommodation of the members and a few ladies accompanied the party. The sides were chosen: Sir Bache Cunard, Mr. Robbins, Col. Jay, Mr. Jay and Mr. Belmont against Mr. Howland, Mr. Crosby, Mr. Latham, Mr. Bennett and Lord Mandeville."

"A marked improvement was already noticeable in some of the players, and if they were to accustom themselves to riding a trifle shorter they would obtain more command over the mallet and the ball. After each side had won a game, a very closely fought contest ensued for the third, and, after some good play on the part of both sides, the Mandeville party came off victorious."

The rules governing Polo imported from Hurlingham, England, were more or less chaotic, and Mr. Bennett was not overly technical on many points, particularly the number of players on each side, which varied from three to eight, depending on how many eager candidates were waiting on the side lines. Furthermore constant shifts and substitutions were made because of the great number of injuries sustained by overzealous new players and their green ponies. The only serious casualty at Jerome Park was that of W. P. Douglas who was compelled to remain at the Polo Clubhouse for several months. Since Delmonicos (the original Charles, Lorenzo and Ciro) was in charge of the Clubhouse, this was not an unmitigated calamity because his fiancée acted as his nurse and companion.

In 1877 a Polo field was established at Newport, Rhode Island, where Society welcomed the new outdoor sport. Mr. Bennett publicized it in the *Herald* by printing accounts of the games which included a full list of the socially prominent who attended.

Polo had outgrown Jerome Park and Newport was only a summer location, so Mr. Bennett had a polo field laid out at 110th Street and Fifth Avenue which was soon named the Polo Grounds. Games were played here twice a week and for the first time an admission fee was charged. The players were opposed to any admission charge, and insisted that they played the game for their own amusement. When the public greeted the game with jeers, epithets, rotten eggs and empty bottles, the players revolted and went to a large polo field at Prospect Park in Brooklyn. Here no admission was charged and before long enthusiastic spectators were gathering to cheer their favorite team. The public acquired a fondness for the game.

The popularity of polo grew steadily. In New York State it was established at Buffalo under the Carys and the Rumseys, and at Saratoga under the Whitneys and the Belmonts; in New Jersey at Lakewood under George Gould and his sons; and in Rhode Island it continued at Newport. Usually the game was started by one man as in the case of Bennett or a small clique of sportsmen who underwrote the expenses.

The sport forged ahead by leaps and bounds and in 1886 the first International Match for the Westchester Cup was played at Newport. The British team won the match, but polo had been established in America.



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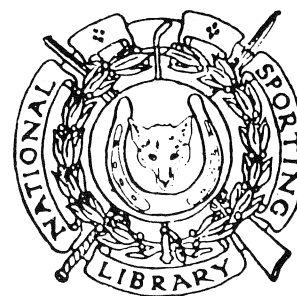
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